

Article

Children Involved in Child Protection: Hostile Attitudes as a Form of Agency

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Abstract

Introduction: It is widely acknowledged that good quality relationships between social workers and children are essential to children's non-formal inclusion in child protection processes. However, research exploring the perspective of children has shown this relationship to be highly complex, particularly when children are taken into care. **Methods:** This paper combines insights from two qualitative participatory studies conducted in Italy, both developed out of a collaboration between university, professional social work associations, and the Italian association of care leavers. The two projects explored, respectively, the perspectives of social workers on the one hand and of children in care and care leavers on the other regarding their relationship. **Outcomes:** The data reveal the complexity of the relationship between children and social workers, showing how both share a mirrored perception of it. Social workers recognise children's negative feelings toward them and see them as inevitable, especially in cases of tense family dynamics. A relationship marked by hostile attitudes, anger, and distrust not only fuels social workers' emotional struggles but also makes it harder to engage children effectively. While hostile attitudes and mistrust are often seen as obstacles to positive engagement, we advocate for recognising them not as barriers to be overcome but as realities to be acknowledged and addressed openly. This approach can create space for both children and practitioners to explore alternative forms of agency, fostering more meaningful participation.



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1. Introduction

In the field of child protection, there is a rhetoric of the child being the centre of interventions and the focus of social workers' practice; many studies have shown how children feel the need for a relationship with social workers and to be involved and informed by them (McLeod 2006, 2010; Damiani-Taraba et al. 2018; Bastian 2019). In fact, the issue of the relationship between children and social workers is strongly connected to children's chances to understand and elaborate processes and changes which take place in their life (Križ and Roundtree-Swain 2017; McCafferty and Mercado Garcia 2024). Several studies have proved that being involved by social workers, being informed about and receiving explanations on what is happening, and being supported in facing life events are important parts of children's growing up; they are connected to the positive outcomes of

protective interventions (Coman et al. 2016; Damiani-Taraba et al. 2017; McGill et al. 2018; McPherson et al. 2021; Fargion et al. 2021; Mauri 2023; Mauri et al. 2024).

While all the above is hardly questioned, the relationship between social workers and children is still a highly controversial issue; it is far from clear how, in many cases, it may be feasible for social workers to develop a meaningful relationship with children in child protection processes (Bastian 2019; Bessell 2011; Križ and Roundtree-Swain 2017; Arbeiter and Toros 2017; Toros 2021a, 2021b). Actually, research has exposed how this relationship presents complexities yet to be disentangled. Many pieces of research have shown how children are not infrequently unhappy about the way they have been treated and complain of having been ignored and not heard (Winter et al. 2017; Bastian 2019; Toros 2021a; Glucklich et al. 2023).

In this paper, we try to cast some new light on these complexities, drawing upon some of the outcomes of two qualitative participatory studies we conducted in Italy on social work with children when children are taken into care. The first study involved exploratory research with practitioners in which we probed their views on their relationship to children. The second one was a parallel study we conducted on children's and young care leavers' experiences of social work in child protection processes. The studies explored situations in which children had been removed from their families. This paper focuses just on one of the themes identified, namely on a specific correspondence between the two studies that we found striking: the correspondence between certain views expressed by children and certain views of practitioners regarding children's hostile attitudes towards social workers. We argue that this hostility is very relevant as it may be the only way in which children can express their agency in a context that is completely beyond their control. We suggest that hostile attitudes should be positively valued and addressed.

2. Children and Social Workers in Child Protection: Issues at Stake

The relationship and engagement of social workers and children in child protection has been the subject of extensive literature and research. This is not surprising given that this element is considered crucial in the field. Indeed, a good relationship is strongly linked to the implementation of children's rights, to children's meaningful participation in decision-making processes that are relevant to them, and to positive outcomes for the children involved (Bessell 2011; Buckley et al. 2011; Cossar et al. 2016; Husby et al. 2018; Wilson et al. 2020; Toros 2021b). However, the complexity of establishing a relationship with children in child protection has emerged from several pieces of research exploring their perspectives and experiences (Wilson et al. 2020). Most are qualitative studies whose outcomes are quite diversified: some found that the majority of the children interviewed were satisfied with their contact with practitioners (Bell 2002), while others reached the opposite conclusion (Leeson 2007). Of course, the differences in outcomes could depend on the contexts in which data were gathered, and the qualitative methods adopted do not allow generalisations. Nonetheless, what clearly emerges in many studies is that encounters between social workers and children are far from straightforward (Wilson et al. 2020). Buckley et al. (2011) show how there are prejudices and mistrust towards social workers; most children and adults involved in research did not feel they were truly participating or had been appropriately informed (Buckley et al. 2011; Damiani-Taraba et al. 2018). The literature review by Toros (2021a) showed that children in child protection have very poor contacts with social workers. In particular, the experience of not being told the truth and being denied clear information negatively affects trust towards social workers (Križ and Roundtree-Swain 2017; Wilson et al. 2020; Toros 2021a).

Research findings may differ or show discrepancies in terms of satisfaction, but there is a fairly strong agreement in the criteria children seem to use to assess their relationship

with practitioners, namely what children find important in their contact with social workers. Among these criteria, honesty holds a special place: for children, this entails social workers' availability to discuss even difficult matters, and openness in providing information (Bekaert et al. 2021; Husby et al. 2018; McLeod 2010). Trustworthiness is also highly regarded by children, and associated with several features of social workers' practice:

Through "the eyes of the children", a trustworthy professional is an encouraging listener, honest, willing to share stories from his/her own life, caring, respectful, and collaborative (Husby et al. 2018, p. 448)

Commitment and support are other aspects that are regarded as crucial by children, as well as being genuinely interested in their lives and their experiences and being available and approachable (Križ and Roundtree-Swain 2017). In the first place, children want to be clearly informed about their situation, which is the basis for participation in decision-making (Križ and Roundtree-Swain 2017; Staines and Selwyn 2020), and they want to be listened to and to have a voice in the decision-making processes that concern them (Muench et al. 2017; Pölkki et al. 2012).

In light of these concepts about what children value in their encounters with practitioners, what does research have to say about practitioners' attitudes towards children? A fairly substantial body of research has focused on social workers and their perceptions of children and has identified both barriers and facilitators to positive relationships with them (McCafferty and Mercado Garcia 2024). One general issue identified pertains to social workers' beliefs and attitudes towards children involved in child protection. Shemmings (2000) was probably the first to identify two main polarised positions among practitioners, located at the extremes of a continuum: at one pole there is an attitude of viewing children as having rights and competences that need to be promoted to enable them to take an active part in the process. At the opposite pole, children are seen as helpless, as not yet able to deal with the complexities of family problems; because of that, they are perceived as vulnerable, in danger, and in need of being rescued. These polarised attitudes have inspired many reflections and studies (Kosher and Ben-Arieh 2020; Križ and Skivenes 2017; Ruch 2014; Bell 2002; Shemmings 2000; Keddel 2018). In particular, Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2020) show the strong connection between the ways social workers conceptualise 'childhood' and how they think children should be involved in child protection; therefore, practitioners who tend to underline that children are vulnerable and in need of protection also tend to engage less with children, as children are seen as not ready to be exposed to and understand the complexity of their situation, let alone to contribute to the decisions to be taken. The opposite is the case with social workers who see children as subjects with competences and rights, whose participation is a key issue. Also, the quality of the interaction changes, with the practitioners emphasising vulnerabilities more favourable to a sort of therapeutic-paternalistic relationship, while those emphasising children's rights being inclined to relate to them in more equal terms. The tension between this polarity of attitudes points to the difficulties in reconciling children's needs for participation and engagement and at the same time for protection (Drake et al. 2019; Kosher and Ben-Arieh 2020).

While the attitude towards children has certainly been recognised as having an impact on how social workers relate to children (van Bijleveld et al. 2020; Keddel 2023), research has identified many other factors that affect, positively or negatively, the interactions and relations between social workers and children. First of all, many have identified the strong emotional content of this relation (Gibson 2015; Stalker et al. 2007). The situations that social workers have to face are often characterised by intense pain and suffering as well as mental chaos; practitioners need to work on themselves in order to be able to think and engage with children and their families, while not acting upon their emotions (Dore et al. 2024; Ruch 2014; Winter et al. 2017). Emotional labour is particularly demanding

when, as it often happens, there is no time and space for practitioners to understand and work through and accept the intense emotions aroused by meeting struggling families (Ferguson 2017; Ferguson et al. 2021). There can be a connection here with social workers' general attitudes: if social workers see children as vulnerable and helpless in facing their mental pain, relating to them could be even more demanding. Ferguson (2017) highlights how avoidance mechanisms towards engaging with children are sometimes activated when social workers' working conditions do not enable them to elaborate and work on intense feelings.

Another aspect which many authors consider relevant concerns the specific abilities and competences of social workers in communicating with children. As Ruch points out (2014), social workers can feel unsettled by the fact that communicating with children is far from straightforward:

In stark contrast to the rigid and standardized nature of the formal procedures that practitioners were expected to adhere to, their accounts of communicating and establishing relationships with children depicted it as an organic and evolutionary process that required practitioners to respond often swiftly, in unplanned ways and to look beyond the presenting behaviour in order to understand accurately what a child was communicating (Ruch 2014, p. 2154)

Many observe that training does not prepare practitioners for this aspect of practice (Lefevre 2017; Healy and Darlington 2009) and particularly for deploying specific techniques such as creative tools for communicating with children or methods for informing children of their difficult circumstances (McGill et al. 2018; Coman et al. 2016; Handley and Doyle 2014).

There is a wide recognition that the context in which practitioners meet children has a strong impact on the quality of the relation. A very general feature considered is the heavy workload which is characteristic of child protection services in most countries (McFadden et al. 2015): connecting and relating to children takes time and resources that practitioners often do not have. The increasing bureaucratisation of social services, which again seems to be a trend across Europe, is widely blamed for creating barriers to communication and for complicating contact with children (Bertotti 2016). Ruch (2014) exposes the many contradictory demands facing social workers in child protection, even while resisting the pressures to bureaucratised their work. Explaining their circumstances to children and informing them honestly and openly appear in this context to be nearly impossible tasks.

Consequently, on the one hand, we have the needs and the will to participate, as expressed by children in difficult situations; on the other hand, there is a complexity faced by practitioners in connecting to children's experience and recognising their agency (Morrison et al. 2019). However, little research has compared the voices of children and social workers focusing specifically on their experiences of child protection.

3. Two Studies Side by Side

The two studies we are discussing were conducted simultaneously, with one of the authors involved in both. The research was promoted and carried out by four main subjects: The National Order of Social Workers; an association of young care leavers, Agevolando (this could be translated as 'Facilitating'); the National Foundation of Social Workers; the social work team of Trento University. The value of juxtaposing some of the findings of these two studies is that, although they were not part of the same project, they explored the same issue, one from the perspective of practitioners and the other from the perspective of children.

The first (Fargion et al. 2021) was an exploratory study looking at the relationship between social workers and children as seen by practitioners. This study was part of a

wider participatory programme aimed at promoting practitioner competences in working with children. In Italy this issue is relatively recent in social work. The steering committee was composed by three social workers from the Social Work Order, four care leavers from Agevolando, and two academics from Trento University.

Usually, child protection entails interprofessional teamwork in which, until recently, direct contact with children was often delegated to psychologists or educators. This possibly reflects a general representation of children as vulnerable and in need of a therapeutic intervention. It was up to the individual practitioners whether to engage directly with children or not. With the endorsement of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it has become evident that it is important that social workers themselves have direct and meaningful contact with children because of their crucial role in child protection. Specifically, the project we refer to comprised an initial exploration across Italy (six regions out of twenty adhered to the pilot project). Our reflections here are based on some of the outcomes of the six focus groups, involving 41 social workers (38 females, 3 males, 15 from the south and Islands, 6 from central Italy and 20 from different northern regions) with at least three years' experience in child protection. The outline for the focus group explored what and how social workers knew about the experiences of children in child protection; participants were then presented with some positive and negative feedback on social workers from care-experienced young people and were invited to comment and discuss them. The feedback comprised eight sentences, such as 'Sometimes I had the feeling of being treated as if I was a number', 'social workers are very important for us. They can change our life for the best. We would like to meet them more', 'I did not like to see her always in her office, why don't we go out and talk over a pizza?', 'Social workers should show more respect towards our parents'. In this paper we will mainly focus on the discussion triggered by the first question.

The second study (FNAS et al. 2021) was part of a wider research programme, promoted by the National Foundation of social workers as one of the first steps in a review of social work in child protection. This study included a qualitative exploration of children and young people who had gone through the experience of child protection, and particularly who had been removed from their parents. This exploration was designed and carried out again together with the association of care leavers. Three care-experienced young people participated in the research design and in the construction of the interview outline. They supported us in finding other young people across Italy for the interviews, and they also participated in conducting focus groups and interviews with children. They were also presented with the analysis and were able to discuss it. This participation was very important. We strongly felt that it made a difference in the way children communicated with us as we were introduced to young care leavers sharing their experiences in child protection. This created an atmosphere of reciprocity, and the children asked us a lot of questions as well.

All children were involved both in a focus group and, a few days later, in an interview. This was because we wanted to give each child the possibility to tell their story and to express their views. All contacts took place in a room provided by the residential care unit. Care-experienced young people were involved only in an interview which was performed online. The main topics in both the focus groups and interviews related to children's experiences with social workers: how they met them, what they knew about them, what the relationship was like, and whether and how they felt included. We designed the research with children bearing in mind that we were addressing potentially sensitive topics with vulnerable subjects. We decided to start with a game to get to know each other. The questions were thoroughly constructed with the group of care leavers, in order to be open and leave space for the children to say what they felt comfortable with. Together, we wrote

the questions down and the children knew the topics in advance. The children took turns asking the questions to each other. In hindsight, we would say that they were very curious about us and willing to share their views. We asked them about their experience of social work in child protection; we did not ask them about their lives or why they had been removed from their families. They only shared what they wanted to.

Overall, 12 children (5 girls and 7 boys; 5 from northern Italy, 7 from the south) and 12 care leavers were involved. The children were aged between 8 and 13 years old, and at the time of the study lived in two residential units in two different Italian cities. The units were involved in the wider research mentioned above. All children had been in care from 9 months to 6 years. The young people were between 17 and 28 years old, four female and eight males, all connected to a care leavers network, with most being from northern Italy, where the association is stronger. All had experience of social work, had been involved in child protection proceedings, and had experienced having been removed from their birth families. Clearly, we had no information regarding the reasons behind the measures, as disclosing this information would have violated the children's right to privacy and the professionals' duty of confidentiality.

In both studies, all interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and analysed with the support of QSR Nvivo, adopting a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis was performed independently by at least two members of the research team in both studies, and the results were presented and discussed with the participatory group. Unfortunately, care leavers were unable to contribute directly to the data analysis in both studies due to their many commitments, but they participated in an open discussion of the results. It should be noted that both studies were wider and more complex than what is presented in this paper. Their outcomes were presented in full, independently from one another, in different Italian publications (FNAS et al. 2021; Fargion et al. 2021). As mentioned previously, here we focus only on one theme because of the interesting connection that emerged between the views of practitioners and children.

Both studies complied with the ethical rules of scientific research in Italy; specifically, the study including children was reviewed and approved by the ethical committee of Trento University.

A limitation of this work is that it is based on two independent pieces of research with different research questions and in which the research tools were different. This of course makes the connection between children and social workers just partial, and we strongly think that more research should be implemented, directly comparing children's and practitioners' experiences. The limitations of the two studies are the ones typical of qualitative research. While we were able to identify certain dynamics, the effective relevance of these dynamics need be tested with a larger sample.

4. Social Workers and Children Mirror Each Other

4.1. Social Workers on Children: The Fatigue of Being Perceived as the Bad Guys

In analysing the discussions in the focus groups, the first observation is that it was difficult to involve practitioners in discussing what they knew and thought of children's experiences in child protection. The question itself was perhaps complex; however, in all the six focus groups, with the exception of a few participants, the majority tended to focus on what they thought of children, and not on what they knew—and how they had gained such knowledge—of children's experiences in relation to them. It is of course difficult to interpret such a finding, but it is striking that when we tried to explain the question more clearly, there was a common reply: namely, they had to face up to the fact that children very often react negatively to social workers. Many shared how stressful they found facing difficult family situations entailing violence, mental issues, addiction, and

severe neglect while striving to do their best to help but still being perceived as the enemy. One practitioner said the following:

"I have never discussed with children how they felt treated, I have to admit that I was wary of exposing myself. . .also because even if you don't look for feedback, they say it to your face that they are terribly angry against the social worker who comes and breaks their ties" (SW F.G. 3)

Many said that children live through very difficult, unacceptable life situations and thus suffer, but as this is the situation they are familiar with and they are very often frightened, they do not want to change it:

"I think that children perceive us as intruders, somebody who upsets a balance they have achieved, who messes up the relational dynamics, even when they are painful. It is difficult for them to perceive all this as positive" (SW F.G. 2)

Additionally, there may be a view that, in any case, child agency is ignored in the system, or at least that this is what children can see:

"I think our task is to help the children but what they feel is that they have been taken away, that there is somebody who decides for them, on the one hand there are parents who cannot take responsibility and on the other social services who decide" (SW F.G. 6)

At the same time there is a widespread belief that children cannot fully understand the situation as it is too complex and involves too many factors; therefore, trying to explain and expecting them to understand is asking too much. A social worker, referring to the point where a decision to remove the child develops, said the following:

"When I think back to the process, I think that at a certain point we develop a sense of direction, we see a way to deal with the situation, and then we should ask the children to understand, while this is just impossible for them" (SW F.G. 3)

Critical issues may emerge even when social workers manage to establish good relationships with children. In Italy, social workers operate in a system where, for instance, courts play a very important role, resources are limited, and rules and regulations must be taken into account. For these reasons, children frequently feel betrayed:

"What I have seen is that then (when there is a good relationship) children develop huge expectations: they expect that you can save them from their difficult situation, that you will never betray what they have asked. They think 'as I have told her, the situation has to change the way I have said to her'. But between this, and what actually happens, too often there is a huge gap!" (SW F.G. 5)

We have seen how authors underline the importance for social workers to keep contact with children. However, social workers' experiences often suggest that, as they feel that they are perceived as enemies, the very attempt to keep in touch and to look for a relationship can in fact be perceived negatively:

"A boy once told me that social workers were like chewing gum under your shoe, you cannot get rid of them: he was saying he was annoyed that we were always in his way. I marked this down" (SW F.G. 2)

Indeed, many observed how personally difficult it was to deal with children's hostility, remarking that one needs reminding that social workers are human beings as well as professionals. They are called upon to evaluate situations, and their goal is to identify coping strategies: they are doing their best to have a positive impact on the life of families. At the same time, not being appreciated or accepted is quite a difficult feeling to live with:

"We are not happy about this, no, because we work with people, we are professionals, but emotions play a huge part in our job, and one does not like not being liked. . .or even being hated" (SW F.G. 6)

However, one general observation was that when social workers are able to continue building a relationship, no matter how hostile the children, with time, relations can radically change. Social workers in all focus groups were unanimous in observing that attitudes frequently change, and gradually children come to see the situation and social workers in a very different light:

"You need to meet many times to open up a space for dialogue, you have to trust they will develop an awareness of their situation and that you are there to help them, you are there for them. . ." (SW F.G. 5)

Another social worker tells the story of a girl who, after time in care, thanked him for having removed her from her family, confessing that the family situation was even worse than what had emerged. In many cases the change takes place when children start asking questions and request support, sometimes also for their siblings. This is interpreted as a recognition that social workers have indeed been supportive. Social workers sometimes say that they know that children need time to accept and process their family situation.

4.2. Children on Social Workers: A Difficult Contact

As we anticipated, all the children and young people we interviewed had been living out of their family. What we first noticed was that in considering their relationships to social workers, few children and young people showed an appreciation for 'their' social workers, but most children expressed deep anger towards the practitioners they had been in contact with. Particularly in focus groups, this was the louder voice: with few dissenting views, social workers were described negatively as 'bad people'.

Most children did not remember meaningful contacts with social workers before being taken into care and tended to represent their being removed from home as a very traumatic and sudden event, something they were not prepared for. The following is quite a typical account:

"I was home and I was watching tv with my dad, and the police arrived and they took me in the car and we arrived in this place which looked like an hospital and there are psychologists who talk to you. . . and at a certain point they told me to get in a car, I was with my brother, 'get in the car and we will take you somewhere', and then I remember that my brother was crying. . . and later we arrived here. . ." (C. F.G. 2)

From children's accounts, such initial situations appear to them totally incomprehensible, even absurd—their quiet daily lives disrupted by child protection services. Only at a later point in the conversations, bits and pieces of their stories emerge which explain the removal, although these are always expressed together with the frustration of 'being placed into care'. In one girl's words:

"They could have arrested my father instead of removing me—they said that they did not have enough proofs to do so, but they had enough proofs to take me here!" (C. F.G. 1)

Here, the girl's reasoning is very strong, as it is very difficult for children to understand what they see as (and are indeed) inconsistencies in the system. Another child says that she had plans to run away from home at the time of her removal, so she was aware of her family's predicament. Despite this, she says that anything would have been better than being placed in residential care. In this context the relationship with social workers, who are perceived as the ones who decide, seems to be seen as compromised from the beginning:

"The social worker explained to me that she was a person who did her job, and she wants to give a helping hand to our parents so that they can look after us, but I do not give a damn about her, I do not listen to her and that's it" (C. Int. 8)

This hostile attitude towards social work extends to the other practitioners that children feel forced to meet:

“Psychologists bother me a lot . . . because they ask me my private things, that is already . . . if my social workers ask me it bothers me, imagine a person that I don’t even know . . . but in fact when I used to go there I always kept myself to myself . . . there were also times when I fell asleep because I didn’t give a toss at all.” (C. F.G. 1)

The children who did not feel involved in initiating the process appear to express their wishes only in negative and passive terms, not listening and not talking. A young girl told us that she used to wear earphones tucked under her hair during meetings, so that she could isolate herself. A boy said that the social worker invited him out for a pizza in order for him to open up, but he said that *“I ate and did not talk”*.

Certainly, there are reasons for these negative attitudes; however, these accounts broadly confirm that children perceive social workers as intruders almost by default. This emerges quite clearly in the interviews with care-leaving young people as well. The main difference with care leavers, however, is that there is less anger and more understanding. Despite this, many say that they received no explanations and were not prepared, only coming to terms with their situation at a later time:

“I got it from my parents when I was going to see them . . . so that’s when I started to understand, more. I already knew things, I just had to start to understand that what was happening was wrong, that’s it.” (C.L. Int. 4)

As we underlined above, many of the children and young people interviewed had a negative view of social workers. On the other hand, a small number of children and young people said that they had a good relationship with their social worker and that they were very fond of them. This girl speaks of her social worker in a very warm way:

“I used to meet her a lot, yes she used to visit me in residential care too. She would be smiling, I was a little girl but she would draw things, I mean through imagination let’s say she made me understand things” (C. F.G. 2)

One boy also talks about his relationship with his social worker in positive terms:

“Yes she listened to me, she made me talk and then she told me to go to my grandmother. But grandmother couldn’t keep me because she is old. [. . .] If I had gone with her, I would have left him (my brother) on his own. So we came here” (C. Int. 3)

It is unwise to draw conclusions from a small number of cases, but it is interesting to note an important detail about the situation of these children and young people: they themselves, maybe together with a parent or a member of the extended family, initiated the process of child protection, and had an active role in it. Needless to say, this is a qualitative research study, hence, generalisations are not warranted; however, the fact that those children who were involved in child protection, without playing any active part in it, seemed prejudiced against social workers, while those who had been active were more open, could be considered as an interesting clue worthy of further exploration.

A final point worth noting is that when asked what advice they would give to social workers, all the children, regardless of their attitude towards social work in general, agreed that social workers played a crucial role in their lives, that they needed to be more in touch with them, to let them talk more—instead of overloading them with questions—and to give them time to come to terms with their situation.

5. Discussion and Final Remarks

In summary, children describe their relationship with social workers more positively when they are involved in initiating child protection measures. When they feel catapulted into the process, they say they have no understanding of, or control over, their lives. In this case, the relationship with social workers is described negatively and in hostile terms, resulting in a passive refusal to communicate. As for social workers, their perception of

their relationship with children is that it is often problematic because children perceive social workers in negative terms and as intruders in their lives. This creates stress for social workers who work in difficult contexts and whose primary goal is to help children. Social workers also see a problem with a child protection system which operates independently from children's views. Moreover, according to many, this hostile attitudes stems from the fact that children cannot understand or accept their situation. Their attitudes change as they grow up and come to terms with the difficulties in their families.

When we put the results of the two research projects side by side, the first thing that struck us was that there was a strong correspondence between children's and social workers' accounts: there may be a difference in the interpretation, but the social workers' views of children's perceptions were very much in line with the way most children talked about their experiences. Contrary to the findings of other studies, where listening to children and social workers felt like being confronted with two completely different and unconnected stories (McLeod 2006), in our research, the connection was in most cases very noticeable. It is not so much that they 'agree to disagree', but that the accounts show that social workers are aware of children's feelings and their deep discomfort. This is the case when they say that children perceive the social worker as an intruder, someone who disrupts their balance, someone who makes decisions for them, or someone who cannot be trusted. Their views of that condition are quite consistent with the children's explanations. Both social workers and the majority of children describe the experience as difficult and full of suspicion and even hostile on the part of the children.

One might think that this hostile attitudes stems from social workers' inability to relate to children, and this could well be the case. Nonetheless, in the children's accounts, distrust and anger seem to precede actual contact, although several negative episodes are mentioned as the basis for negative feelings. Particularly in the focus groups, we have shown that both direct observation and transcripts suggest a tendency to target social workers a priori, almost as if they were a kind of scapegoat on which to direct the anger generated by one's family situation and, at the same time, by being taken away from home against one's will.

First of all, how can we make sense of this prejudiced hostility expressed by children and perceived by professionals? Given what has been said so far, one seemingly crucial element relates to the issue of children's agency and the extent to which agency is recognised in child protection (Morrison et al. 2019). According to our interviewees, children are more open to relate with social workers when they are actively involved in initiating child protection procedures. When children perceive child protection as something that happens to them, they portray themselves as helpless, without a voice or the opportunity to speak (see also on this Fylkesnes et al. 2018; Wilson et al. 2020; Kirka and Tamutienė 2023). From children's accounts, in some cases and coherently with other studies, removal from the home seems to be described almost as a police arrest or abduction, without a clear idea of the reason for it (Fylkesnes et al. 2018). Children describe themselves as caught up in a system they do not understand; decisions about their lives are being made over their heads. In this framework we could formulate the hypothesis that hostile attitudes and passive resistance may be children's only way to express their agency (Morrison et al. 2019). Behaviours such as wearing headphones during interviews, refusing to listen to explanations or even to speak to social workers, may be the only ways for children to position themselves as subjects of their own experiences, rather than passive recipients, 'victims' of inexplicable decisions made by others.

The social workers' narratives, on the other hand, as we have said, show a high degree of awareness of children's feelings and of being perceived as intruders. This provokes deep feelings of distress. Practitioners describe themselves as working hard to support and

work with the family, particularly to put the children's interests first: feeling rejected by the children seems to be quite difficult to face and represents a barrier to communication (Ferguson et al. 2021). At the same time, social workers do not seem to see children as possible actors. They tend to see them as vulnerable, without the means to understand and tolerate the complexity of their predicament (Kosher and Ben-Arieh 2020; Shemmings 2000). They also perceive that external constraints severely limit their room for manoeuvre (Bruheim Jensen 2020): many say that when they are able to listen to children, they cannot do what they ask because of system constraints, and therefore children feel betrayed.

Within this picture, it is perhaps possible to grasp the complexity of the processes required to enhance social workers' chances to enter into a supportive relationship, one that children need and value as important (see Section 2), in which it is possible for children to share their experiences and to have a say in their life.

The two studies presented here have focused on another issue from the ones highlighted in Section 2, namely, the hostile dynamics in which barriers to the relationship emerge. However, one factor contributing to these dynamics is that social workers interpret children's hostile attitudes and mistrust only in negative terms. The different interpretation we proposed above, namely that hostile behaviour and rejection are the only ways in which children can assert their agency, introduces different opportunities for social workers in order to establish a meaningful relationship with children. If hostile attitudes and passive resistance are seen in terms of agency, they acquire a positive connotation, representing children's strength and ability to respond to a context in which they feel overwhelmed. This can provide a change in perspective: hostility and mistrust do not represent something to be overcome, but something that has to be positively acknowledged and dealt with openly; in turn, this can pave the way for children and practitioners to search for other forms of agency that allow for more effective participation. The final observation is that, in any case, it is unrealistic to expect social workers to establish positive and supportive relationships with children in a system that leaves no room for and does not value the voices of children. Attention must therefore be paid to the child protection system in this regard. Effective relationships with professionals can only be established in an environment that values children's opinions. If decision-makers do not take children's views into account, children will feel betrayed, particularly by social workers, who are the professionals with whom they have the most meaningful relations.

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